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Tamil Nadu

# ST status now a reality, but long road ahead for Narikuravars and Kuruvikarans

For the Narikuravars, has the long constitutional battle paid off?



ST status now a reality, but long road ahead for Narikuravars and Kuruvikarans

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Published on: 01 Jun 2016, 2:32 pm



In the midst of vegetable sales in Chennai's Kottur market, a string of cherry red beads glisten in the afternoon light, one of many that an aged aypsy woman sells outside a colony.

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She signals to a path that leads into a dusty piece of poromboke land. "300-400 of us, packed tightly under tiny roofs," she says, dangling her new batch of ombre tinted anklets at me.

The Narikuravas (jackal catchers) and Kuruvikaras (bird eaters) are nomadic tribal communities from Trichy and Villupuram that pride themselves on the traditional occupations of hunter-gathering and making and selling bead necklaces. Ever since they moved to the city for opportunities, the struggle has been to preserve their tradition while blending into urban life.

The big win for them came last week, when the Union Cabinet approved the introduction of two Bills in Parliament to include them under the Scheduled Tribes (ST). This however, was no easy struggle. A four and a half decade long constitutional battle to change status from MBC to ST began in 1965, when the Lokur Committee recommended inclusion of Narikoravans (Kuruvikaran) in the list of Scheduled Tribes.

In the 1980s, M.G. Ramachandran, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu proposed to the Union Government to include Narikuravars in the ST list. After several protests and hunger strikes, the UPA government in 2013 was forced to issue a bill to include the community in the ST list. In 2015, MoS Pon. Radhakrishnan, points out in a letter to the Tribal Affairs Minister that the Narikuravar Community is 'nomadic, extremely poor and one of the most vulnerable communities' in Tamil Nadu, and a meager



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Outside a tiny chapel at the centre of the settlement, Shanmuga is slumped onto a grey plastic chair, pensive. One of the local Narikurava leaders, he details his painstaking crusade for the bill to be passed. "For me, growing up in a small settlement in Trichy to making recurrent visits to Delhi for strikes and protests – I saw how the world saw our people. They admired our colour, our culture and our mysticism. But that's where it ended. Whether opportunities were afforded to us, they didn't care." 5 decades later, he only has one question. Why did it take so long?

The Lokur Committee rulebook says a tribe must have spatial organization (separate and excluded existence), distinctive culture, 'primitive' traits, shyness of contact with community at large and socio-economic and educational backwardness. Shanmuga says a primary dispute arose when it came to 'shyness of contact'. "I was always baffled by this part of the report. If we did not move out of our worlds and demand recognition, we would not be where we are today," he says.

In Kottur, better education and employment opportunities are expected post this move. children in the settlements drop out after 8th or 10th standard. The Kottur settlement boasts of a 12th educated beautician and an engineer. "I sit at home and make necklaces and cook," says 20-year-old Malli, whose grandmother was a famous Narikurava singer in her tribe and is insistent on keeping the tribes' music alive. She pulls out a phone from her mother's bag and

plays Halile, a song from Mysskin's Nandhalala. "Saroja, my grandmother, sang this. She sang for it because she thought it would help our tribe, bring some recognition. But they just took us for our culture and then pushed us aside, like it always happens."

In a brick shanty, a bleary-eyed Geetha seamlessly switches between Vagriboli (A mix of Marathi, Telugu and Tamil) chatter with the neighbours and curt Tamil. "ST status will hopefully bring us some recognition, but what's the use if our own community is divided?" After the move to the city, what were previously subtle differences between the Kuruvikaras and Narikuravas have made a stark appearance. Geetha is perturbed by the migrants' and Narikuravas' jeers at young Kuruvikara school going girls who wear their sarees differently. Kuruvikara women wear their pavadais or petticoats outwardly, while Narikuravas wear their sarees in conventional fashion. "We have to be conscious of what we wear, we can't go out after six. It's in these little things, where we don't know if moving to the city was good or bad. We felt freer in our land."

"We have lived on no-man's land for a long time," says Paruthi, a pani-puri seller. Pushing his rickety cart through the stony path, he mews at a sudden flurry of kittens and hens that emerge from under a basket. "People yell at us because they think we eat their richly fed cats. Films like to paint us as comical characters. People ask us if we are Muslim because our songs have an Arabic tonal quality," he says. The tribal rituals are held in a small patch of land on the outskirts of the city during Chithira Maasam because "we

don't want to scare away people." Geetha intervenes, "The truth is, we're all trying to be like them."

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